

# Nomadic Cultures Beyond Work Practices

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**Abstract.** In this issue we explore the conceptual, analytical and design challenges inherent in the notion of “Nomadic Culture”. The papers included highlight how research on mobility has contributed to the CSCW community, while pointing to unsolved problems, future challenges and research agendas. We see this collection of papers as developing a more holistic perspective on nomadic culture, and connecting this scholarship with recent research on sharing and exchange platforms as sites of work. This intervention contributes to an understanding of nomadic culture by providing a more contemporary perspective on the social and cultural aspects of workplace sites and co-working practices.

# 1 Extending the concept of nomadic practices

Research on nomadic practices has become an established tradition within CSCW since the first studies on the matter. The workshop “Beyond Mobility: Studying Nomadic Work”, organised at ECSCW 2007, was a milestone in this regard. It investigated the rapid emergence of nomadic work practices and, at the time, it argued for an understanding of the “dynamic practical achievement involved in making, making the most of, and working in different places” (Rossitto et al., 2007). Ten years later, at the ECSCW 2017 workshop “Nomadic Cultures Beyond Work Practices”, we revisited the notion of nomadic practices in light of recent research and empirical changes, such as the spread of wireless connectivity and the rise of the so-called ‘gig economy’. In so doing, we explored the notion of *Nomadic Culture* as the entanglement of economic, social, cultural and technological practices that enables and constitutes nomadcity. The pieces composing this special issue are the results of the position papers presented in the ECSCW 2017 workshop, under this perspective.

## 1.1 Summary of contributions

The issue starts with Avram’s (2017) auto-ethnographic account of her nomadic practices during a sabbatical year. As she reflects upon how she accomplished work seamlessly at different places, and analyses her motivations to engage in work at those locations, she raises questions regarding the affordances and hindrances linked to nomadic practices. After all, are nomadic practices to be seen as a bug, or a feature of contemporary work/life? Avram’s account illustrates the tensions stemming from being part of a nomadic culture that seeks to make the most of work and life. She draws attention to issues of acceptance and to trade-offs, which seems to be predominant in such cultures, although overlooked most of the time, as suggested by de Carvalho (2013).

Korn et al. (2017) illustrate in their paper how organisational support is key for the development and maintenance of nomadic cultures. This issue, although previously raised by Chen and Nath (2005), has not been deeply addressed in the literature. In outlining the nomadic culture existing within a German university, the authors explore issues of pervasive commuting practices, and institutional frames in the accomplishment of collaborative work. The article calls for further research on the matter, which is indeed one of the pressing issues for future CSCW research on nomadic practices.

Jarrahi and Sawyer (2017) go back to problematizing nomadcity, by discussing the paradoxical affordances of liminality as a defining character of the notion. The authors discuss how nomadcity goes beyond spatial movements and spans issues of contextual shifts, temporal incongruities, separation and independence from organizations’ physical and digital boundaries, etc. Their

contribution strengthens the articulation of the notion of nomadicity refined by CSCW researchers over the years (see e.g. Ciolfi and de Carvalho, 2014; Humphry, 2014; Liegl, 2014; Rossitto, 2009).

Ciolfi and Lockley's (2017) contribution moves the focus to how the blurring and/or separation of work and non-work activities in nomadic cultures are managed. While their contribution overlaps slightly with those from Avram and Jarrahi and Sawyer, it brings to the fore a totally different perspective on these issues. It shows, in fact, how strategies applied to dealing with the potential blurring of work and life within nomadic cultures are highly personal and connected to technological infrastructures.

Issues of technological infrastructure are further discussed in the following piece by de Carvalho et al. (2017b), which addresses how *infrastructuring* (Pipek and Wulf, 2009) is an important concept for understanding and fostering nomadic cultures. The authors report on a study carried out on nomadic practices of social activist communities, introducing a theme as yet not fully explored by research on nomadicity. In particular, the focus on the nomadicity of an event and its infrastructure, rather than on the workers, brings a completely new perspective to issues concerning the accomplishment of work in, and across, different locations.

Finally, Rossitto et al. (2017) introduce in their paper another emerging trend concerning research on nomadic cultures. The authors turn their attention to issues of social innovation through sustainable nomadic communities. Specifically, they outline how *sharing* and *caring* are two predominant values underlying the social-cultural practices at the Hoffice. Hoffice – a merger of Home and Office – is a self-organising network that has emerged as a participatory response to the challenges of flexible and nomadic work arrangements.

The remainder of this editorial introduces the outcomes of our ECSCW 2017 workshop while seeking to set up an agenda for future research on nomadicity. We start by elaborating the notion of nomadic culture, we then proceed to discuss issues of nomadic practices in current scenarios, such as the “gig economy”. We conclude by presenting proposed future directions for research on nomadicity beyond entrepreneurship narratives, beyond encounters with the technology, and beyond working at several locations.

## 2 Elaborating on nomadic culture

The notion of nomadic culture was first introduced by Chen and Nath (2005), who located it in the domain of work where they see such a culture enabling the achievement of competitive benefits through workers' use of ubiquitous computing technologies. Their definition of nomadic culture emphasises those “artifacts, beliefs, and basic assumptions” that underpin organisational culture (2005: 56). In a later article, they suggest that the development of “an effective mobile work environment” is one of today's challenges; they thus emphasize the

need to study those issues that foster successful mobile work from the socio-technical perspective (Chen and Nath, 2008). They emphasise the interdependence of social and technical systems, but only insofar as they “must be jointly optimized in order to determine the best overall solution for the organization” (2008: 41).

By expanding Chen and Nath’s account of nomadic culture, we draw attention to the broader ecology of nomadic practices including, for instance, family-related and various life matters. This provides an opportunity to discuss the various trade-offs between organisations and the workforce, and the reciprocal demands, adjustments and accommodations inherent in nomadic work practices and life styles (see e.g. de Carvalho et al., 2017a). Thus, we argue that the notion of nomadic culture entails both the cultural and technological components that shape everyday practices. For example, as short and long-distance mobility become central features of work and life, these mobilities are no longer lived only as instrumental means of moving from A to B. They also involve the turning of the in-between spaces into “liminoid spaces of transition” – that is, social and cultural contexts in and of themselves (Vannini, 2010).

As a variety of mobile services, apps and devices have become a pervasive presence in everyday life, a range of dedicated, public or semi-public places are being set up to enable work on the move, or at a variety of locations. This includes, for instance, “COffices”, airport lounges and designated areas, as well as emerging trends like the Hoffice community that self-organizes pop-up co-working days. This relates to the set of practices inherent in turning one’s home into a workplace to be shared with other people, including strangers. These trends change the meanings of work (and life) places, times, social ecologies and associated social relations. Yet, as the application of mobile computing moves at a fast pace, and working “anytime, anywhere” (Kleinrock, 1996) becomes the practiced norm rather than merely a vision, scholarship on nomadic practices seems to have lost its momentum. With a few exceptions (Ciolfi and de Carvalho, 2014; de Carvalho et al., 2017a; Rossitto et al., 2014), it seems that HCI and CSCW research are more interested in technological innovations rather than in practice-oriented agenda examining contemporary nomadic lives (see, for instance, Weilenmann and Juhlin, 2011).

Our workshop at ECSCW 2017 revisited research on mobile CSCW by connecting the range of nomadic practices emerging from the use of technology (i.e. place-making, place-managing, planful opportunism, etc.) to the personal, socio-economic and political contexts in which such practices are enacted.

Various studies have illustrated how nomadism can be regarded as an emergent and dynamic process unfolding as people engage in an ecology of practices for the mobilisation of their workplaces (Brown and O’Hara, 2003; de Carvalho, 2014; Luff and Heath, 1998; Perry et al., 2001; Rossitto et al., 2014; Weilenmann, 2003). These practices are highly technologically-mediated, not

least via the promise of enabling individual empowerment and flexibility (Gray et al., 2017). The effect is a constant reconfiguration and management of work/life boundaries (ibid.), and of motivational factors, ranging from choice to obligation and emerging opportunities (de Carvalho et al., 2017a).

### 3 Normalising nomadic practices and the “gig economy”

The workshop provided a context in which to connect the notion of nomadic culture to the emerging forms of work enabled by sharing platforms and the so-called “gig economy”. Over the past decade, scholars have turned to study those networked platforms that act as marketplaces for crowd work (Kittur et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2016) peer-to-peer exchange (Bellotti et al., 2014; Lampinen et al., 2015), and on-demand labour (Teodoro et al., 2014; Thebault-Spieker et al., 2015). The gig economy has been flagged as an important indicator of the future of work, despite critiques of how the often-rosy narratives related to working anytime anywhere (Gregg, 2013), and the so-called democratisation of work practices herald a shift in power from labour to capital. Studies on different types of platform labour have made significant contributions by mapping experiences of those who use these systems to access paid work (Glöss et al., 2016; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016) and depicting the networks of collaboration that emerge despite workflows that assume individuals labouring in relative isolation (Gray et al., 2017). We see these new forms of work as embedding and *normalising* nomadic practices. We aim to deepen our understanding of ‘nomadic culture’ by providing contemporary perspectives on the social and cultural aspects of work/life, time/space, and nomadic practices – their associated opportunities and shortcomings.

Post-Fordist capitalist restructuring is changing definitions of work and ‘the worker’ as well as work and life practices via outsourcing, deregulation and flexible employment relations – as, for example, in the gig economy. More research is required on the dynamics of nomadic culture, how it shapes or constrains action and interacts with wider social structures from the economy to the state. As some forms of work and other life activities become independent of time and space, the modern industrial work/life (space/time) boundaries and norms are unravelled giving rise to “nomadic culture”. We are interested in how the experience, practice and symbolism of daily work and life, as these are technologically-mediated, may be transformative of individuals and their spatial, temporal, cultural, and socio-political contexts. One of the questions addressed during the workshop related, for instance, to emerging repertoires of capacities and affordances: how these are being engaged with, and to what effect? For example, in what ways do contemporary technological discourses and practices

legitimate post-Fordist capitalism by stressing how technology can enable more individual autonomy and life flexibility (Fisher, 2010; Gray et al., 2017)? And, to what extent, and in what ways, does the promise of personal empowerment, authenticity and autonomy shape nomadic workers' lives and embedding nomadic culture?

## 4 Future directions to research on nomadic cultures

The workshop provided an important interdisciplinary context for discussing CSCW and HCI research on nomadic practices within a time trajectory (spanning from 2007 to the present, and envisioning future developments all the way to 2027). It focused in particular on those issues that still remain unsolved and pointed to relevant questions for future research. Investigating nomadic cultures presupposes the acknowledgment of shifting boundaries with respect to interdisciplinary research concerns, but also with respect to the empirical enactments of how people orchestrate their personal boundaries to manage interpersonal relationships and work/life practices (Avram, 2017; Ciolfi and Lockley, 2017; de Carvalho et al., 2017b). This opens up a range of research opportunities looking beyond situated encounters with the technology to focus, instead, on the broader events and socio-technical issues the technology creates (Jarrahi and Sawyer, 2017; Korn et al., 2017; Rossitto et al., 2017). Below, we highlight three overarching themes that we see as central to further explorations of the notion of Nomadic Culture. The themes are interwoven and encompass a range of socio-cultural analytical issues and design challenges that call for cross-disciplinary research to include, for instance, the ethical, political and economic issues framing the adoption of socio-technical platforms and infrastructures.

### 4.1 Beyond Entrepreneurship narratives

The first theme emphasizes a concern for more systematic investigations of differing case studies of nomadic cultures. What we see in this regard is a need to move beyond entrepreneurship and knowledge worker narratives to include, for instance, precarious and vulnerable cohorts of people (e.g. migration and refugee flows), blue collar workers and manufacturing settings (e.g. Industry 4.0), artistic settings where mobility is inherent in the experience of the performance (Rossitto et al., 2016), grassroots movements (such as the Hoffice network), and so on. While this list is not meant to be exhaustive, investigations of such settings are relevant as they provide an opportunity to contextualize nomadic practices in broader discourses of change and post-Fordist work organisation. This opens up novel opportunities for cross-disciplinary research and for developing a research

agenda that tackles alternative political, ethical, and economic aspects inherent in studying nomadic practices. For instance, the focus on concepts such as ‘work/life balance’ itself, as a form of organisational branding, can be seen as evidence of another way in which values of ‘life’ outside of work are at least partially subsumed to capitalist values and agendas. What alternative analytical issues could novel narratives of nomadic practices provide?

### 4.2 Beyond encounters with technology

The second theme brings attention to the role of technology as discourse in shaping socially, culturally and ideologically both nomadic cultures on the whole, and the subjectivity of nomadic lives. It draws attention to the role of constellations of technologies and digital platforms in enabling nomadic cultures, but also in creating a potential range of problems/issues to be dealt with. It addresses the technological, cultural, political and economic rationalities that underpin and legitimise contemporary enactments of nomadic work and the reproduction of nomadic culture.

One interesting possibility for research is the exploration of design-oriented methods (for instance, critical design and design fiction) that address the interplay between technology design and more holistic issues, such as the political, cultural and economic rationalities inherent in designing for nomadic cultures.

One could also consider the implications for methodology in extending research to contexts outside of the market-place, or in focusing on moments in practice that provide insight into the liberating and oppressive features and dynamics of nomadic culture, as for example being able to choose where and when to engage in work vs. having to cope with the expectations to be working anytime anywhere. This agenda might pick up on and develop earlier discussions and debates relating to gender and technology.

### 4.3 Beyond working at several locations

The last theme draws attention to the range of organisational aspects, motivational factors, personal values and expectations underling the flexibility stemming from this way of working and living. It entails a transition from micro to macro aspects of nomadicity, and from place-making practices to trajectories of nomadic lives (for instance, the study of migration flows; or values that remain outside of capitalist notions of value). Finally, it calls for practice-centred research entailing the work and non-work dimensions of people’s lives, and the negotiation and reconfiguration of work–life boundaries. Important aspects here include the interpersonal efforts to manage and co-ordinate boundaries between different activities and roles, value and values. This is not a simple question of work–life balance. It extends to the investigations of interpersonal relationships and of how colleagues, friends and family members, for instance, might impact each other’s

choices, and the capability to uphold desired boundaries. Other interesting issues here are aspects of self-presentation, reputation, and branding in terms of how they connect to nomadic practices as a choice, as an obligation or even as a personal identity.

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